

THE LIFE OF ST. PATRICK SCIENTIFICALLY TREATED.¹

PATRICIUS MAGONUS SUCATUS, the Roman-Briton from South Wales, who became the apostle and patron saint of Ireland, was a great man, who occupies a large place in history, and Prof. Bury has presented us with a great biography, worthy of the subject and of the brilliant equipment brought to bear on it.

Our "fabulous" lives of saints are full of facts, often strangely disguised and misplaced. The venerable records deserve the most thorough scientific treatment, of which this book is a noble illustration. Our remarks by way of review will be confined to some points of interest to astronomers and archaeologists.

We were curious to learn when and how St. Patrick's Day, March 17, became a fixed festival. It is with Patrick, as with many another saint, that while the circumstances of his death are very obscure, the day stands forth with a positiveness which at once challenges inquiry. The saint died in 461 A.D. He was "buried quietly in an unmarked grave." "The pious excitement about his bones arose long after his death." In searching this book for information about the day, a very curious state of things discloses itself. The author says that the legendary date of the saint's death "had become vulgar in the seventh century," but the earliest reference we can find is the statement of a scribe who died in 846 A.D., a postscript to a copy of Patrick's "Confession." "Huc usque uolumen quod Patricius manu conscripsit sua: septem decima Martii die translatus est Patricius ad cælos" (p. 227). That was written 385 years after the saint's death. Though we should have liked to have the matter more clearly explained, we make it no point to doubt that March 17 was observed before the ninth century. What strikes us is the fact that in 846 A.D. that was the date of the vernal equinox. It is hard to believe that the Irish of the ninth century could have celebrated St. Patrick's Day without noticing the coincidence.

Turning to the legend of the saint's death, we find him converted into a solar hero. An angel predicted that his death would "set a boundary against night that no light might be wasted on him: Up to the end of the year there was light, that was a long day of peace" (p. 264). Another version has it that "after his death there was no night for twelve days, and the folk said that for a whole year the nights were less dark than usually." The one version seems to refer to the equinox, and the other to the summer solstice when for twelve days before and twelve days after the sun's declination is within its highest northward degree.

It is of interest to note that our two native British patron saints, Patrick and Dewi, seem to have been made solar heroes. In the legend of the death of Dewi, or David, we have a midsummer festival described in Christian terms, and there is ample evidence that Dewi's day was June 24 before it was fixed on March 1.

When Patrick became a solar hero, assuming that he did, he became entitled to the shamrock. About the only thing one finds it hard to forgive in our author is that he never mentions the shamrock. How can we think of Patrick and March 17 without the shamrock? We must have it brought in. The story of how Patrick utilised the popular triadic herb to teach the Irish the fundamental dogma of his faith bears the stamp of truth as clearly as anything known of him. He found the plant in great popularity among

¹ "The Life of St. Patrick and his Place in History." By Prof. J. B. Bury. Pp. x+404. (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1905.) Price 12s. net.

the "pagan" Irish, as well as among his Brythonic countrymen. The Welsh bards used to decorate their spring Gorsedd with the trefoil, and, as we shall see, Patrick had a great deal to do with the Gorsedd. To Celts, who thought in threes, the plant had possibly no rival as an emblem.

We have now associated an equinox and solstice date, a solar hero, and a Gorsedd emblem which our modern bards state was used at the equinox. But our modern bards have evidently changed the order of festivals, substituting the solstitial quarter days for those of the May-year. The shamrock must have belonged originally to the May-day festival, as February would be too early for it. Patrick found in Ireland the May-year in its glory, and he set about changing it into the Church-year, as part of his mission. Legend represents him lighting a fire on Easter Eve in open defiance of the fire lit on the selfsame night at Tara in connection with a high pagan festival. Our author rightly interprets the legend.

"The idea is that Easter is to replace Beltane, the Church to overcome the heathen fire, and it is a matter of no importance that the day of Beltane was the first day of summer, which could never fall on Easter Eve" (p. 107).

"We can detect here, in the very act as it were, the process by which pagan superstitions which insisted on surviving were sometimes adapted into the Christian calendar" (p. 108).

The legend of the saint's death has quite a Beltane setting. "A thorn-bush burst into flame on the wayside and was not consumed. And an angel spoke and turned him back" to Saul, to die there rather than at Armagh. A thorn-bush bursting into flame, i.e. flowers, before March 17 reminds us of the Glastonbury thorn-bush flowering at Christmas. There is also a legend of an Irish saint presenting a queen with a dish of blackberries at the Easter festival. Over and over again the early Church festivals are spoken of in Beltane and All Hallows terms. The chief reason seems to be that for a long time the early British and Irish Christians had no effective substitutes for the May-year festivals.

Descriptions of British pagan and early Christian festivals should be read with the aid of whatever light the bardic Gorsedd, which was once common to all parts of the British Isles, can lend us. Where Patrick lay dead, angels who kept watch over his body diffused "sweet odours of wine and honey," which is dangerously like representing the angels holding a typical Irish wake. The angels are the bards who, dressed in white, presided over the ceremonies of the Beltane feast, and wine and honey were their customary dues on such an occasion, liberal quantities of which consumed at the feast diffused sweet odours. The legend strives to harmonise the pagan feast, the Church festival, and the anniversary of Patrick's death.

This brings us to a very instructive episode in the saint's life, his attack on the "King Idol of Erin." In the plain of Slecht was a famous idol, "apparently of stone covered with silver and gold, standing in a sacred circuit, surrounded by twelve pillar stones." "It was told in later times that the firstlings, even of human offspring, used to be offered to this idol, in order to secure a plenteous yield of corn and milk, and that the high kings of Ireland themselves used to come at the beginning of winter to do worship in the plain of Slecht." Our author thinks that "the story is based on a genuine fact, but that the later accounts impute to it a significance which it did not possess." The story relates that Patrick struck down the idol with his staff, which, Prof. Bury observes, he could not have done without the consent of secular powers.

It is the clear truth of the setting of the story that strikes us most. What Patrick attacked was a pagan Gorsedd, and the incident is of great value as showing the use of the stone circle in the fifth century. We seem to see it in use in the earliest of Welsh tales, but we cannot assign definite periods to the incidents recorded. Here, however, we have a fairly historical episode, which should be read with Geoffrey of Monmouth's account of the May festival at Stonehenge, also in the fifth century. The Slecht Gorsedd was the same in plan as the present Welsh one—a large stone surrounded by twelve other stones. The disappearance of the former goes far to prove the truth of the history. In Wales the Gorsedd was not suppressed in the interests of Christianity. It actually received Christian baptism. The first Gorsedd after the introduction of Christianity among the Welsh is called in the bardic records "Cadair Fedydd," baptismal chair. It is an expression that explains how in

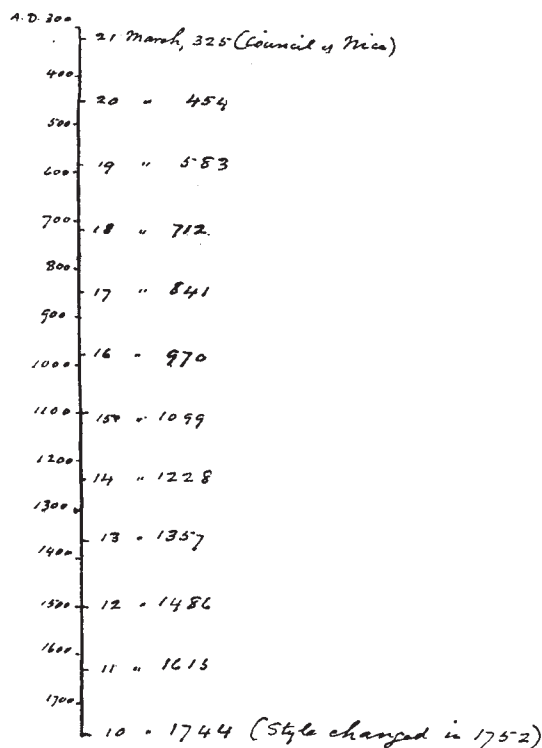


FIG. 1.—Diagram showing changes of the equinox-solstice date.

Wales it is unreasonable to look for any gap in the history of the Gorsedd there.

Our author has narrowed the inquiry into the birthplace of Patrick to the Severn estuary. Had he used some Welsh traditions about Patrick in Glamorgan he might have settled the question for good. There is a persistent tradition that Patrick was kidnapped by "pike-bearing" Irishmen from Llantwit-Major, in that county, and Mr. T. C. Evans (Cadrawd) has found three Banwens in that neighbourhood, either of which would suit for the Bannaventa mentioned as Patrick's home.

The accompanying diagram (Fig. 1) embodies the method by means of which Sir Norman Lockyer was able to note the equinoctial significance of St. Patrick's Day, before the facts mentioned by the present writer were available. Such a diagram may prove very useful to the historian. The changes in date have been calculated as from the Council of Nice, and each

change represents an error of a day in 129 years. By a similar calculation as from B.C. 46, the beginning of the Julian Year, the 17th was an equinox date from A.D. 728 to 859, covering the whole period during which the particulars about Patrick were put together for an ecclesiastical purpose.

The present writer has found the following working hypothesis very useful in determining the significance of anomalous or irregular fair days. Any dates between the 10th and the 20th in March, June, September, and December may be suspected to be arrested solar days. When other evidence confirms such a supposition, the period of the institution of the fair or festival may be found by means of the above diagram. The process of arrest referred to is very evident in the case of fairs. In 1824 there were two three-days' fairs held at Bradford. One was on December 9, 10, and 11, being the dates of the fair before the change of style. The other fair was on June 17, 18, and 19. If the last figure is to be regarded as the solstice, we are taken back to 600 A.D. But it would be safer to regard the 17th as being the first of the three solstitial days, and that in the ninth century. The 17th is an important fair day, and it happens that St. Alban's Day is given in English calendars as June 17. The Welsh bards have somehow introduced the name Alban as that of a solstitial quarter day. That would naturally be suggested if Alban's Day at any time fell on the solstice, which may very well have happened in the ninth century. In an old Welsh calendar of about 1471 A.D., Alban's Day is June 22, when the date of the solstice was the 13th. That, however, does not dispose of our theory. By regarding the 22nd as the middle solstice day preceding the Council of Nice, we get the very period of the British proto-martyr. It was when the 21st was a solstice date that the earliest Christian calendar in the West was compiled, and it is possible that Alban's Day was fixed from the very first on the 22nd. The 21st is still called St. Alban's Eve. The question, therefore, is, Have we in the case of Alban's Day two arrested solar dates?

JOHN GRIFFITH.

NOTES.

SIR HENRY ROSCOE, F.R.S., and Sir William Ramsay, K.C.B., F.R.S., have been nominated foreign members of the Accademia dei Lincei, Rome.

THE Vienna Academy of Sciences has awarded the Baumgarten prize to Prof. E. Ritter v. Schweidler, for his work on the phenomena of dielectrics; the Lieben prize to Prof. H. Benndorf, for his work on the transmission of earthquake waves in the interior of the earth; and the Haitinger prize to Dr. Robert Kremann, for his work on the esters.

We learn with regret of the death of Prof. Egon von Oppolzer at the early age of thirty-seven. Dr. von Oppolzer, who was a son of the celebrated Theodor von Oppolzer, was born at Vienna in 1869, and was educated at the universities of Vienna and Munich. In 1897 he became an assistant in the observatory at Prague, where he discovered in 1901 the variability in the brightness of the planet Eros. In the latter year he was appointed extraordinary professor of astronomy at Innsbruck, where he remained until his death. Among the subjects on which he wrote are astronomical refraction, solar physics, and the application of physical theory to stellar problems. He also made contributions to meteorology. A new form of zenith telescope was constructed by him, as well as a photometer of novel design. The